



Ostap Vishnya



**THE
MASTER'S
CHRISTMAS
TREE**





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**KIEV
DNIPRO PUBLISHERS
1984**



Oh, but the snow we had that winter — fluffy, huge, thick flakes of snow! There was so much of it that we had to dig pathways to get to the storehouse, the pig-sty and to the barn...

We'd dive out of our hallway into the snow — we were too small to go to school — and ran up and down those paths like between white, snowy walls — higher than our heads they were — there was so much snow!

We'd run and run and then — jump! — we'd go head-first into the drifts.

What fun it was!

Mother and Father weren't sad or gloomy about it all because Grandmother said:

"It's good, all this snow. There will be a fine harvest!"

But we didn't need any such reassurance. We slid down the hillsides on our sleds, tied wooden boot-trees to our right boots and ran up and down the road, hopping along for all the world as if we were really on skates, made snowmen, had snowball fights.

And when the older boys, once in a while, gave us a whirl in a roundabout, then our delight knew no bounds. What screaming and laughter!

But do you know what a roundabout is?

A roundabout is really very interesting and lots of fun. When the creek or pond freezes over so that one can safely walk on it, a stake is hammered into the ice. Then a wagon wheel is placed over the stake, to which a long pole, with a sled attached to its end, is tied. Then shorter poles are pushed between the spokes of the wheel and these are manned by the older boys to turn the wheel. The sled at the end of the long pole flies around the circle like a whirlwind. So when the older boys seat us smaller





youngsters on the sled and begin to turn the wheel, we are sometimes swung around at such speed that we lose our grip on the sled and fly off like snowballs, sliding along the ice and into the snow banks.

A winter with lots of snow — that was real happiness for us!

* * *

We lived on the Master's Estate in the village, for Father worked for the Lord of the Manor.

One evening, before the Christmas holidays, Father came home and announced:

"The Master has ordered that we bring the children to the Manor on Saturday for a Christmas Tree Party!"

Mother was disturbed.

"Now what on earth gave the Master such an idea? What do they need a Christmas Tree Party for? And they're still much too small to start visiting Manor Houses!"

Father thought it over.

"You're right, of course," he said. "But what can we do, he'll be angry if we don't do as he says."

But Mother wasn't happy.

"It's nearly ten miles to the Manor! It's winter and cold! How will they get there? They'll freeze!"

"Oh, we'll get them there somehow! We'll put a roof on the sled, fill it with hay, bundle them all up in their sheepskins and off we'll go!"

We children, of course, followed this conversation with bated breath and wondered: "What could it be like, this Christmas Tree?"





We had never had a Christmas Tree at home. We looked forward to the Christmas holiday, but not because of the tree. We visited Grandfather and Grandmother, sang Christmas carols, and carried the Christmas Eve Supper with us to their place. For this we were given candy and a shiny "gold" penny — Grandpa and Grandma saved the brightest and newest pennies, "gold" as we called them, for this occasion.

But our greatest delight came just before the holidays, when Grandpa butchered a boar.

Having laid out the huge animal, Grandpa would then singe it, after which he would wrap it up in straw and all of us, including Grandpa and Grandma would climb up on it and bounce up and down so as to soften the fat.

Grandpa would then give us a piece of the boar's singed ear or tail to chew on for our help...

Such happiness was not ours every day!

And now, all of a sudden, a Christmas Tree. And at the Manor House!

* * *

We started dressing for our trip early Saturday morning.

Mother washed us all with soap. For us boys there were new shirts and pants, for little Parasya — a red embroidered dress, and even a necklace with a silver clasp.

And what a sleigh Father prepared for us! On the sled he had put a box of the kind in which the potters take their wares in to market or bring the chaff in from





the fields. The box was filled with hay and over the top Father had put a roof, so that it looked like one of to-day's cars, if you could imagine such a thing! In the traces he harnessed Acorn, a big brown horse that belonged to the Manor and the white-hoofed mare, Codling, followed in the rear by her foal, Breeze.

We were wrapped warmly in sweaters and sheepskin coats, and away we went. Father took us. Mother had to stay home with the little ones who were too small to go out "into the world" as yet. Little brother had only just learned to walk and little sister had been found under the cranberry bush by Grandmother just a month ago.

We arrived at the Manor without any trouble except for one incident when the sled almost overturned in a gully, but Father quickly jumped off and put a strong shoulder to its side and saved us from tumbling over into the snowdrifts.

We arrived early. The Master had said that we must come for 7 o'clock in the evening, so we had time to visit before the party with our Uncle Methodiy, who was the Master's coachman.

Evening soon came, however, and we duly arrived in the Master's drawing room.

We walked in, trembling with nervousness, for the Master was usually cross and we were afraid of him. And there was the huge Christmas Tree, shining with candlelight, in the centre of the large room. Around it a group of young masters and ladies were dancing. The Mistress was sitting at the piano playing.

The Master sat in an armchair, flapping his slippers in time to the music. He stopped when he saw us.

"Well, are you frightened?" he boomed.





For we stood bunched up inside the doorway without taking our eyes off the tree.

Suddenly the Master shouted:

“Andriy, my pipe!”

Andriy, the kozachok house boy, rushed in, bringing the Master's pipe, a long-stemmed affair. Giving it to the Master, he then went down on his knees, lighting a match to give him a light. Whether he slipped on the shiny floor, or what, he somehow, in his hurry, knocked the pipe out of the Master's hands. The Master immediately gave him a strong shove.

Our Parasya, on seeing this, screamed in fright.

The Master covered his eyes. We all rushed to Parasya, and in my hurry, I caught one of the branches of the Christmas Tree, knocking a candle down on one of the young ladies. She, too, screamed. There was much running around and great confusion. I dashed forward to put out the candle and knocked the young lady off her feet. But nothing terrible really happened, except for a lot of fuss and bother. The young lady got up, in tears, and rushed out somewhere.

Father “rounded” all of us out of the drawing room into the corridor and took us back to our Uncle, the coachman. The next morning we went back home.

Father then got a lecture from the Master on how wild his children were.

And that was the first and last time we were invited to a Christmas Tree Party...



Ostap Vishnya (1889—1956), the brilliant Soviet Ukrainian humorist, not only wrote skits, lampoons and pamphlets he is known for best. *The Master's Christmas Tree* is one of his many short stories for children.

In soft, watercolour tints he paints the snowbound village of his childhood with its Christmas merrymaking — and sad realities of everyday life.



ОСТАП ВИШНЯ
ГОСПОДСКАЯ ЕЛКА

Рассказ
(На английском языке)

Киев,
издательство
художественной литературы
«Днипро»,
1984



Ukrainian children's tales in English translation with many colourful illustrations are regularly published by Dnipro Publishers.

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41-1 P 50

